



CITIZEN ROUNDTABLES

ROUND ONE SUMMARY REPORT

KEY THEMES, CONCERNS, AND AMBITIONS
AS EXPRESSED BY RESIDENT PARTICIPANTS

FEBRUARY, 2020

DESTINATION:2030

2020 STRATEGIC PLAN | DECATUR, GEORGIA

Introduction

Beginning with a standing-room-only kickoff on January 23, 2020, some 800 volunteers committed to three subsequent small-group Roundtable meetings to drill down on priorities for Decatur's next decade of policy planning and implementation. Before the emergence of COVID-19 forced a pause in group meetings, the first of these Roundtables was completed in its entirety. So there's a base for considering the broadest categories of citizen concerns and aspirations.

Comments from each of 71 individual citizen groups was collected via flip-chart during a two-hour discussion. Each set of flip-chart notes was then transcribed and submitted to the project team, formatted for consistency, and combined into a collective spreadsheet of 3,278 unique contributions.

These comments fall under 15 broad topic areas. Below the following overview is a list of those topics ranked by the percentage of total comments that apply. And under each are capsule summaries of the comments.

Here are the potential takeaways from this early conversation:

Overview

First of all, many of the comments received could apply to more than one category. Since this whole effort is about strategic planning that will be implemented by the City of Decatur, most comments imply complaints or recommendations related to City services. Concerns about community character reflect degrees of worry about equity and diversity. Infrastructure is part of the mobility discussion, as is parking.

Bottom line: Talking about strategic planning means talking about many things at once.

So what's on citizens' minds? Worries about change, mostly.

- » Costs of living, particularly housing costs, are increasing faster than household incomes, frustrating attempts to keep median and lower wage workers in town. The same goes for assuring seniors can age in place.
- » There's definitely a need for more housing, especially at lower price points. But not at the cost of letting developers and builders run the show. And not if it requires reducing the tree canopy.
- » Do new apartments in the downtown mean more crowding for the already over-crowded schools? If the City is committed to expanding mobility choices, what about more safe, dedicated routes for bikes and pedestrians? But on the other hand, if more public space is reserved for biking and walking, won't that make traffic worse? (And how about those planters!)

There are no surprises when it comes to citizens' views about taxes (less, please) and parking (more, please). But those perennial complaints ranked much farther down in the category list than topics related to multiple options for getting around, protecting diversity, expanding affordable housing, and viewing strategies through a sustainability/resilience lens. Does that suggest citizens are already thinking about tradeoffs for doing what they say they value?

That discussion will increasingly be the focus as process builds on this foundation of community engagement.

Topic Categories Ranked by Percentage of Total Comments

— Mobility/Transportation > 17.1% of comments

There is widespread appreciation for and pride in Decatur's MARTA access, bike-ability, and walkability. And while there are certainly complaints about congestion, particularly at peak hours, there are more comments about increasing and better integrating Complete Streets-style policies that expand pedestrian and biking options. Mentioned by several: a desire for an expanded network of linked walking and biking routes, including greenways, that safely connect neighborhoods and commercial destinations. Also multiple comments backing intra-city transit like a free shuttle. Under suggestions for improvement: concerns about needed repairs to streets and sidewalks, cut-through traffic in neighborhoods, and accessibility for the disabled.

— City Operations > 13.7% of comments

Most commenters laud City officials and staff for their commitment to long-range planning, policy-making transparency, responsiveness to citizens' concerns, and accessible leadership. Under the general category of growth management, some are concerned about what they see as over-catering to developers and builders when it comes to regulating things like tree removal and the growth of apartment developments that may put additional pressure on crowded schools. Many seem worried over how to cope with what they see as an expanding population of the homeless. And under the "Aspirations" heading, several commenters suggest strengthening the City's online communications efforts about specific projects and programs.

— Environment/Sustainability > 11.4% of comments

While there's appreciation from commenters regarding Decatur's recognition of sustainability/resilience priorities, a high percentage argue for stronger initiatives with regard to clean energy, recycling, composting, parks and other green spaces. "Trees" and "tree canopy" were among the most frequently appearing words and phrases. Intersections with other topic groupings: clean energy and mobility strategies, community character and parks, environmental communications, and city operations.

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— Character/Feel/Quality of Life > 10% of comments

One comment that captures much of the sentiment: "In general, we are proud of Decatur and the progress it is making. We want MORE and DEEPER – deeper relationships, deeper opportunities, deeper options for work and living." General appreciation for small town feel (family oriented, access to leadership, involved citizenry, local shopping and entertainment) and worries about losing it (intensity of downtown development, larger homes, and those PLANTERS). Appreciation of quality schools that attract families but concerns that people will move when their children graduate.

— Housing/Lifelong Community > 9.1% of comments

A representative aspiration: "Decatur as a magnet for all people, a place where people want to put down roots and remain, a place that people return to at all life stages." One overwhelming concern is a perception of diminishing affordability for those with median wealth and below. Worries about tear-downs for McMansion building, regulations that

appear overly friendly to developers, apartment development that may put added pressure on schools and city services. Biggest subset of comments under the general affordability topic: the challenges of aging in place. Intersections with other topics: costs of living and city character/McMansions and neighborhood character, aging in place and equity/diversity/inclusion.

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— **Equity/Diversity/Inclusion** – 7.5% of comments

The central fear in one quote: "In the end, we begin to be a less inclusive community." While there is appreciation for the diversity and inclusiveness Decatur has achieved (diversity of voices at the table, women-led civic initiatives, youth involvement), worries fall under the broad, but vaguely defined category of "gentrification." The challenge, for most commenters, is directly connected with costs-of-living topics, particularly costs of housing and the inability to comfortably age in place for many citizens.

— **Community/Neighborliness/Volunteering** > 7.5% of comments

Comments are overwhelmingly supportive of the sense of community in Decatur and the opportunities to engage with other citizens and with City leaders. There are shout-outs to the ways the arts and festivals bring people together and to a physical environment conducive to walking and gathering (particular on the Square). The concerns expressed are about potentially unhealthy trends related to neighborhood turnovers (gentrification) and diverging interests of newcomers compared to long-time residents. So there are direct crossovers with topics like City Operations, Diversity/Inclusion, and Community Feel.

— **Business/Economy/Indiecatatur** > 5.6% of comments

While there's strong support for the prevalence of local shopping and entertainment options, there are just as strong concerns for perceived changes in the mix of local vs. chain businesses, principally because of high rents for small businesses. There are shout-outs to specific examples of local enterprises like the Little Shop of Stories, the Brick Store, Eddie's Attic and the Indiecatatur initiative. But there's a desire for a greater mix of businesses beyond the restaurant category. Similar to concerns under other categories about the costs of living, commenters lament the lack of sufficient businesses paying higher wages to match the rising costs of housing.

— **Schools/Education** > 5.6% of comments

Commenters leave no doubt about their pride in the quality of schools. They appreciate the ability of many students to walk to school and their access to advanced study (like the International Baccalaureate program). Concerns revolve around what many see as pressure on the system by the number of students schools are expected to serve. Overcrowding worries dominate the comments. Also an issue for many: a perception that the school system and the City aren't always on the same page. As with quality of life and other topics, concerns here are related to fears of losing something of high value to the community.

— **Arts and Culture** > 3.1% of comments

Comments are universally positive about Decatur arts events such as the Book Festival and music on the Square. The aspiration is for more diversity (including a performance

arts center and a downtown movie theater) and for affordable space for rising artists and more opportunities for youth/student involvement.

— **Taxes** > 2.2% of comments

Besides the universal complaint that taxes are generally too high, commenters point to the need for better diversification of funding sources – more commercial properties and property taxes, for instance, to help offset the reliance on residential property owners to pay for schools and city services. Lots of comments about the need for additional strategies to lower the tax burden on lower-income seniors.

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— **Crime/Police/Safety** > 2.1% of comments

There are concerns about lax enforcement of existing laws like noise ordinances, smoking, and traffic violations. And there are worries among some commenters that Decatur is becoming less safe and that police aren’t as visible on walking patrols as they should be. But there are others who make the point that the perception of crime is at odds with the reality as reflected in crime stats. Some commentators note the advantages of walkability and the efforts of police to maintain the sense of safety, especially for “our free range kids.”

— **Civic/Assets** > 2.1% of comments

This is the category with the most specific references to things commenters especially liked. Among them: the Square, the library, the Rec Center, Agnes Scott College, the potential for Legacy Park, Focus magazine. Under aspirations, the call is for more of the same, especially parks and green space, and continued promotion of opportunities to utilize civic assets.

— **Parking** > 1.8% of comments

Some commenters suggest perceptions of a lack of parking, especially in the downtown, is different from the reality. But most commenters lamented the difficulty of finding convenient, affordable parking. Among their complaints: aggressive booting practices; inconvenient parking garages; insufficient reserved parking for neighborhood residents, the elderly, and the disabled; and inconsistent rules between City parking facilities and those privately owned.

— **Infrastructure/Utilities** > 1.2% of comments

Commenters call out general complaints: stormwater management/flooding issues and pothole repair/road maintenance. A few connected infrastructure planning with sustainability/resilience planning, including a suggestion for using stormwater to irrigate green space. And some lauded Decatur’s commitment to biking and pedestrian mobility while suggesting improvements in infrastructure supporting that commitment (protected routes, greenways).